

Your College Binge Drinking May Haunt You

Are the college students in your family budding alcoholics?

A survey article in the Journal of the American Medical Association might answer your question. In examining the drinking practices of 1,700 students from 16 colleges, the survey showed that there has been a marked decrease in light drinking -- but an increase in binge drinking

Binge drinking, defined as having at least five or more drinks in a row in a two-week period, is what half the men and a third of the women reportedly do. They drink to get drunk, the study says. (Only about 10 percent of men and 15 percent of women are non-drinkers, meaning they've had no alcohol in the past year.)

In terms of health and job consequences, male and female binge drinkers turned out to be similar: Fifty percent suffer hangovers, 35 percent have "unplanned" sex and -- along with alcoholic blackouts or amnesia -- 25 percent miss classes the next morning and drop behind their schoolwork.

Significant differences between men and women bingers relate to physical violence and legal problems: 50 percent of males vs. 15 percent of females cause damage to property; 30 percent of males vs. 10 percent of females get into trouble with police; and 10 percent of males vs. 3 percent of females get into physical fights. Although 50 percent in each category ride with intoxicated drivers, only about 30 percent of men vs. 10 percent of women actually drive after having had five or more drinks.

Is your kid a sip off the old block? What does all this mean? To get some clinically valid answers, I interviewed some middle-aged, upper middle-class alcoholic patients who are currently in substance abuse treatment in a rehab facility. To evaluate this data in terms of their own life experiences, I asked them the following questions:

- (1) What was your drinking like when you were in college?
- (2) How did your own drinking change after college?
- (3) Why are you in treatment today?

The results show that although our patients thought of themselves as "fun drinkers" while they were in college, today they realize that they were actually bingers in college. But since they were college students in "more understanding times," the drinking consequences were easily avoided. E.g., although they did a lot of drunk driving, nobody got arrested and though they had unplanned sex, they thought of it as fun sex.

The difference between then and now, these patients

concluded, is that today drunk driving means jail and loss of license; and booze-related unplanned sex means un-safe sex -- because it can lead to STD's, pregnancy, date rape or AIDS. Ah, the good old days!

Long-term Consequences The most serious consequences, as these achievement-oriented alcoholic patients see it today, are the effects that their binge drinking had on them in the long run.

"When you're in college," a depressed businessman explained, "productivity means scholastic achievement. But bingeing, as we all know today, impairs your short-term memory formation. That means your learning efficiency goes down, and may not be back up to normal when you start your next binge."

All of them agreed with the statement: "When I compare myself to my peers who were light drinkers or abstainers in college, I am behind in all areas today."

What happened to these patients after college? Their drinking patterns stayed the same, but their "explanations" changed. What in college was rationalized as "relief" drinking -- the drinking you do to fix a strained love life or the stress of cramming for finals -- continued in the real world. It became Happy hour drinks in bars to unwind after "a hard day at the office," and pre-dinner cocktails for stay-at-home moms after "a hard day with the kids." College "reward" drinking became a solitary toast to the barroom mirror for a successful sales meeting or a difficult deadline met on time.

Why are these alcoholics in treatment today? Their label changed: The "college student binger who drank to have fun" is now "the middle-aged alcoholic who drinks to hang on." The cumulative effects of drunk driving arrests, business setbacks, divorces and mental depressions finally made treatment necessary. "I had nothing left to lose except my health" is a common theme.

Do all college bingers become middle-aged alcoholics? Nobody knows. But we can speculate: We know that alcohol damage to body organs is a function of time and amount, i.e. the longer and the more heavily you drink, the more damage you do to your health.

One alcoholic attorney smirked at this clinical truism. "I, for one, am still not sure that I'm really an alcoholic," he grinned. "Until yesterday I thought of myself as only a binger. But this morning when the doctor showed me my lab tests, I had to reconsider: I may not have alcoholism -- but my liver does.

"In any case, I've got to stop drinking. And my wife and I have to start talking to our kids about their drinking. We have two in college, and I'm really worried. They sound just like I did when I was in college."